

Foster Parents – the carers' perspective might help your planning

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Nearly 75% of Looked After Children in the United Kingdom are with foster carers. Whilst the analysis we often consider with our clients focuses on the needs, requirements and perspectives of fostering agencies and social workers, this report surveys foster carers themselves. They're on the front line so it is instructive to get their perspective, in fact the desire for foster carers to be involved in decision making is one of the key points to come out of this year's report.

How old are they?

They are an aging group, with 2% increase in foster carers aged between 55 and 74 and a corresponding decrease in the proportion of carers below 54.

Relationships with local authorities

70% of respondents to the survey foster for a local authority or Trust with 30% linked to an independent of voluntary fostering provider. The relationship with children's social workers seem to create the largest source of tension with:-

- Respondents reporting that social workers respond for decisions about 50% of the time leading to delays that could prevent foster children from fully participating in school family and normal social activities.
- Just over a quarter of foster carers were not clear about what day to day decisions about their foster child they had authority to make, although that confidence rose with longer term foster carers.
- Foster carers generally feel respected by supervising social workers and health professionals, but nearly 42% of the time have a less than comfortable relationship with children's social workers who do not, they say, treat them as an equal member of the team around the child.

Training and Support

The top five training gaps identified by carers are

- therapeutic parenting,
- behaviour management,
- mental health,
- specialised first aid and
- attachment

Unsurprisingly therefore the report has recommended that all foster carers have an annual training program addressing both standard and specialised training required to meet the needs of the children they are caring for.

In terms of support, 70% of foster carers rate the support they have from their supervisor as good or excellent but only 44% feel that the out of hours support is excellent or good and only 37% are happy with the short breaks/respite support they need.

The fostering network recommends that all fostering services should provide a dedicated out of hours fostering support service for carers.

Unplanned placements and changes to placements

There is an inevitable pressure on placements. No one will be surprised to hear that:-

- just over half of foster carers have been asked to take children outside their approval age range and
- a third have been asked to take children from outside their approved type of fostering. Those figures by themselves are concerning, but more than three quarters of foster carers say they were not given additional support or training if taking a child outside their approval range.

How can your organisation address this? The report recommends that each placing authority should conduct an annual needs analysis of their LAC population in order to determine and plan for those children's needs. This will facilitate a targeted recruitment and commissioning strategy for foster carers willing, able and trained to meet the needs of the current care population.

A third of foster carers had experienced an unplanned placement ending where they felt it was not in the child's best interests. Two thirds of foster carers weren't given the opportunity to feed information to the child's next placement. Recommendations include a suggestion that all foster carers should be given the opportunity to feed into referral information to ensure a smooth transition, and guidance should be introduced to ensure that a child's contact with their former foster carers and other people who are significant to them can be easily maintained.

Funding

59% of foster carers claim that the fostering allowance and the expenses they can claim do not actually meet the costs of looking after their fostered children. Recommendations are inevitably that fostering allowances should be sufficient to cover the full cost of caring for a child and that foster parents should be paid for their skills and expertise, including retainer fees between foster placements.

Dealing with allegations against carers

More than a third of fostering households have experienced one or more allegation that somebody in the household has behaved in a way that has harmed a child, committed a criminal offence, or acted in an unsuitable way.

Respondent's report the majority of allegations were unsubstantiated or unfounded, but 67% of respondents say they didn't receive support following an allegation.

The report concluded that a framework should be in place for dealing with allegations and that foster carers should be given the same HR, emotional and legal support that would be afforded to their social work colleagues. This includes an independent support throughout the allegation process.

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